Dealing with Procrastination and Time Management

Practical tools for starting a task you keep putting off, and for making good use of your time.

What is procrastination?

You have decided to do something, but you put it off without a good reason. It is a type of avoidance: you avoid the task, even though you want it done.

Why do we put things off?

Thoughts often get in the way. Watch for "I can't" thoughts, and for two common mistakes in thinking:

- **Overestimating how hard it will be.** You expect the task to be much harder than it turns out to be.
- **Underestimating how good it will feel.** You expect little reward from doing it, but you feel better than expected once it is done.

The table on page 2 helps you check both of these guesses against what really happens.

Tools to get started

- **Break the task into smaller chunks.** Start with the smallest first step.
- **Make a list you can check off.** Checking off each step shows your progress.
- **Prioritize and make a plan.** Decide what matters most, write the plan down, and schedule it.
- **Find someone to be accountable to.** Tell someone what you plan to do, and when.
- **Set a timer for a set period of time.** Work until the timer rings, then stop or take a break.
- **Switch to an easier task** — but one that is still useful to do.
- **Make the task easier or more pleasant.** Play music, get help, or find a short cut.
- **Challenge the thoughts that get in the way.** Ask if the thought is true, and if it helps you.
- **Instead of "shoulds," weigh the good points and the bad points.** List all the benefits of doing the task, and all the costs. See if the benefits are greater than the costs. Writing it out makes it clearer, and helps you think of more benefits.
- **Build in a reward.** Plan something good for yourself for when the task is done.
- **Use good time management.** Organize with to-do lists and a list of your goals and projects (see page 3).

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Try it out: weigh the good points and the bad points, and check your guesses.

Weigh the good points and the bad points

Pick one task you keep putting off. Write it here: _____

Benefits of doing it	Costs of doing it

Are the benefits greater than the costs? Yes / No If yes, what is your first small step?

_____

Check your guess

Before you start, rate how hard you expect the task to be, and how good you expect to feel after it. Use 0 to 10. After you finish, rate how hard it really was, and how good you really felt.

Task	Expected difficulty (0–10)	Expected satisfaction (0–10)	Actual difficulty (0–10)	Actual satisfaction (0–10)

Most people find the task was easier than they expected, and felt better than they expected.

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A simple system for keeping track of what to do, and when to do it.

Dealing with priorities

Spend less time on unimportant activities. Spend more time on things that are important but not urgent — before they become urgent.

	Urgent	Not urgent
Important	**Crises.** These tend to get done.	**Best use of your time.** Spend most of your time here, before these things become urgent.
Not important	**Other people's priorities.**	**Time wasters.**

Time management and organization: four lists

Keep these four things, and keep them up to date:

- **List of goals and projects.** Things you cannot get done in one chunk of time.
- **Someday / Maybe list.** Goals and projects you are not ready to take action on right now.
- **To-do list.** Things that can be done in one step. Include one-off items, and the next step for each goal and project.
- **Calendar.** For things that must happen at a set time, or on a set day.

Steps to keep the system working

- **Weekly review.** Once a week, go over all four lists. Plan the coming week. Move any to-do items you want to be sure to get done that week onto your calendar.
- **Brief daily review.** Each day, check the calendar for the past day and the coming day, and make any changes.
- **Put each to-do item in either your to-do list or your calendar — not both.** If you can, put it right into your calendar.
- **As things come up during the week, write them into one of the four lists.**

> **Over time:** you get more done by being more organized. You come to trust that the system works, so you no longer stress about getting things done, and no longer feel overwhelmed.